

## Frantz Fanon: The Empowerment of the Periphery

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The current fascination with Fanon and his ultimate relevance can be explained by the convergence of the problems of colonialism, space and the subject-formation, which outlines Fanon's oeuvre. Fanon's understanding of space as a special form of domination has come to influence the debate on periphery, both on the global and local level. Fanon analyzed everyday racism as a geopolitical colonization, as an alienating spatial relation

and treated colonization as spatial organization. This article seeks to provide a political biography of Frantz Fanon, by shedding light on how he has influenced the current debate on peripheries and further attempts to demonstrate Fanon's relevance in the era of globalization.

**Keywords:** Space; Alienation; Violence; Revolution; Colonialism; Globalization

### Frantz Fanon: The Empowerment of the Periphery

In his foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Homi Bhabha describes globalization as a new form of colonialism. For Bhabha, both colonialism and globalization are characterized by dualities producing similar mechanisms of reification, marginalization and dehumanization of peoples. Colonialism spread on behalf of the *mission civilisatrice*, globalization in the name of democratization (Bhabha xi). According to Bhabha "it is the reproduction of dual, unequal economies as effects of globalisation that render poorer societies more vulnerable to the 'culture of conditionality'" (xii-xiii). Global duality should be put in the historical context of Fanon's founding insight into the "geographical configuration' of colonial governance, his celebrated description of the compartmentalized structure of colonial society" (xii).

In fact, the world system today is a divided world as described by Fanon: "divided in two, is inhabited by different species" (5). While today's dualisms and mechanisms of domination have undergone discursive changes through such terms like "global South" and "global North," inequalities between the peripheries and the center have not lessened 50 years after Fanon's death. The so called, globalization, with its

new forms of domination and exploitation under the auspices of the IMF and World Bank as well as the speculative economy, drives masses towards a kind of chronic marginality, promoting the emergence of violent peripheries.

With his two classics, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon's understanding of space as a special form of domination has come to influence the debate on periphery, both on the global and local level.

In addition to the debate on peripheries on the global level, and related to the intensification of globalization, Fanon also influenced the discussion on urban geography and the formation of marginalized spaces within urban centers. His analyses of everyday racism and the rise of Manichean cities are still an appropriate tool for interpreting power relations and the rise of violence in megacities. For Mota-Lopes, "this way of reading Fanon sees him as an important if not indispensable reference to our present understanding of world-historical social reality—in particular the unequal, structural interrelationship between core and periphery" (45).

This article seeks to provide a political biography of Frantz Fanon, attempts to shed light on how he has influenced the current debate on peripheries and further

attempts to demonstrate Fanon's timeliness in the era of globalization.

### Biography<sup>1</sup>

Frantz Fanon was born in 1924 into a middle-class family on the Caribbean island of Martinique, where he completed his schooling. One of his teachers was the Afro-Caribbean writer and politician, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), whose idea of *Négritude*<sup>2</sup> is considered to have influenced Fanon greatly. During the Second World War, Fanon joined the struggle against the Axis powers, enlisting in the Free France Forces, and served in a tank division in North Africa. Meanwhile, in a training camp in Morocco, he encountered the deeply ingrained racism rife within the French army. Disillusioned, he saw that a "white" and "Christian" soldier was preferentially treated, while the rest of the soldiers in the same battalion were regarded as nothing more than cannon fodder. Fanon experienced that the real world is divided into the world of the "white man" and that of the "black man." The discrimination and forms of racism he encountered served as the templates for his first work *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in Lyon in 1952.

Following his schooling in Martinique, Fanon studied medicine and philosophy in Lyon. After graduating in 1953, he was

appointed the director of a psychiatric clinic in the city of Blida in central Algeria, one year before the outbreak of the Algerian War. In Algeria, he discovered a world of violence and repression. His experience of racism in France found its expression in outright acts of violence in Algeria. As a psychiatrist and doctor, he was confronted with the firmly established "École psychiatrique d'Alger" of Antoine Porot (1876-1965), who had developed a theory on indigenous people, characterizing them, allegedly trapped in the constraints of their own culture, as primitive, incapable of progress and violent. However for Fanon, it was colonialism that was responsible for the latent aggression and unrestrained violence, and he believed it was furthermore responsible for the psychological disorders leading to, via alienation, depersonalization.

As the Algerians resorted to armed resistance, Fanon maintained contact with the leadership of the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*). In December 1956, he submitted his resignation as doctor in charge of the psychiatry unit. In his resignation letter, he wrote that it would be an absurd desire to cure people who experience systematic dehumanization on a day-to-day basis (Cherki 135). After a stay in Paris, Fanon moved to Tunis, where he came into contact with the entire leadership of

the FLN. Here, he also joined the editorial team of the FLN newspaper, *El Moudjahid*, and represented the Provisional Government of Algeria at many international congresses and diplomatic missions. In 1960, Fanon was diagnosed with leukemia. He died on December 6, 1961, at a hospital in Maryland, United States. In accordance with his own wishes, his body was brought back to Algeria (Zerguini 170-72), where he was buried with full military honors in an already liberated part of the country close to the Tunisian border. Fanon's engagement in the FLN's struggle against French colonialism was the empirical basis for his most famous work *The Wretched of the Earth*.

After his death, Fanon's work was analyzed around the world and in each instance was approached with a different set of questions and specific contexts. As early as the 1960s, he became, similar to Che Guevara, a symbol and icon of the "Third World" in its struggle against colonialism. Fanon's work not only contains analyses of decolonization and repression but also reflections on the futures of "Third World" countries. It furthermore expresses the hope that a new humanity will arise, parallel to a decolonization of the human existence. After its translation into English, Fanon's work attracted such interest in the USA that, in the mid-1960s,

veritable "fan" groups and reading circles emerged. Cherki described the reception of Fanon amongst Afro-Americans as follows: "Even if it wasn't read by everyone, *The Wretched of the Earth* became a Little Red Book or Bible—as the case may be—for black Americans" (277). Fanon became compulsory reading for political activists of the Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party. In Africa, Latin America and Asia, Fanon's work is not only examined in connection with colonialism, but is also referenced in struggles against internal repression and marginalization. Besides revolutionary movements, leftist groups, and marginalized minorities, Fanon's thoughts are also quoted, instrumentalized and claimed by dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, for instance the Baath regime and supporters of pan-Arabism.

In the 1960s academia, Fanon's work foreshadowed development theories like neo-colonialism, dependencia and world system theories and inspired various theorists in this field. Thus, Wallerstein writes: "Fanon represented for me the expression of the insistence by those disenfranchised by the modern world system that they have a voice, a vision, and a claim not merely to justice but to intellectual evaluation" (xxii). Fanon's analysis of "the pitfalls of national consciousness," a cri-

tique of the post-colonial urban elite, helped to propel Wallerstein in the direction of a world systems perspective (Goldfrank 157).

In the 1990s, Fanon was rediscovered with the rise of postcolonial and cultural studies. In Anglo-American discussions, a Fanon revival is seen among those identified with the poststructuralist school, in theories of space, in urban geography, in gender theory and in critiques of neoliberalism. Fanon thereby almost becomes a hallmark of the various "post-"discourses. Fanon uses Marxist theory, psychology, critical race theory, and global political economy in order to give an account of the colonized subject, the problem of nationalism, and the path to liberation. In his work, Fanon combines the ideas of the young Marx and Hegelian dialectics looking for a homogeneous revolutionary group or class, driven by the desire to forge an emancipatory universal subject of liberation (Wolter).

Often stigmatized as a glorifier of violence (Arendt 20, 69), Fanon saw the violence of the indigenous members of the periphery as a response to the varieties of violence stemming from the colonial master—physical, psychological, structural and cultural. Fanon wished to hold up a mirror to the Europeans, and he hoped to remind Europe's intellectuals and citizens of their

complicity in the atrocities of colonialism. As Judith Butler has put it: “Fanon’s work gives the European man a chance to know himself, and so to engage in that pursuit of self-knowledge, based upon an examination of his shared practices, that is proper to the philosophical foundations of human life” (216).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward W. Said suggests that Fanon was influenced by Georg Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) (326-30). Similar to Lukács, Fanon considers violence as an act of mental will that aims to overcome reification. Said describes Fanon’s idea of violence as “a cleansing force” that allows for “an epistemological revolution” (327).

Unlike the young Marx, who identified the proletariat as a class that would liberate itself from labor through empowerment, in *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon focuses on peasants as revolutionary subjects and violence as the instrument to achieve liberation. Under the prevailing conditions of colonialism, there would be no labor much less a proletariat. Therefore, neither class struggle led by an avant-garde-party nor trade-unionisms provide means for overcoming oppression. Instead, the colonized subjects can only “empower” themselves by resorting to violence. For Fanon,

violence is labor and the militant ready to use violence is a worker:

For the colonized, this violence represents the absolute praxis. The militant therefore is one who works. ... To work means to work towards the death of the colonist. Claiming responsibility for the violence also allows those members of the group who have strayed or have been outlawed to come back, to retake their place and be reintegrated. Violence can thus be understood to be the perfect mediation. The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end. (44)

Fanon saw violence as the only means by which the colonized could liberate themselves from the master-slave relations. At first, violence should erupt spontaneously and should then be canalized to forge a common consciousness in the struggle for a national identity (51).

Here, Fanon takes up an aspect of the leftist-revolutionary tradition since Marx, namely to identify a socially coherent group which, emerging out of a historically specific situation of extreme deprivation, becomes the avant-garde of the revolution. Excluded from sharing the wealth of a society and its political processes, but characterized just as much by a certain

degree of homogeneity, such a group, whether being Marx’s proletariat or Fanon’s “wretched,” can turn relations of domination upside down. This is due to the group’s strength in numbers, its organizational skills and its propagation of a cogent ideology with the ability to mobilize the masses.

Fanon questioned the possibility of development under the condition of global capitalism. For Fanon “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” (58), but the wealth of the center also belongs to the periphery. Because reversing the system of domination was seen as impossible within the existing structures of global capitalism, and in order to achieve total independence, violent revolution and a global distribution of wealth were the only means for driving out oppressive neo-colonial forces from the world. Like Samir Amin and André Gunder Frank, Fanon saw the role of the native bourgeoisie very critically. This comprador bourgeoisie, which took power in the periphery after independence, would not be able to guide the free peoples into “development” and “modernity.” Fanon accused this class of collaborating with the colonial power to ensure that the interests of both would continue to be met after the declaration of formal political independence. Therefore, this comprador bourgeoisie serves the

interests of the center rather than those of the indigenous peoples. Structurally speaking, the postcolonial era is thus a continuation of the colonial era. In the words of Fanon:

The national bourgeoisie, which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime, is an underdeveloped bourgeoisie. Its economic clout is practically zero, and in any case, no way commensurate with that of its metropolitan counterpart which it intends replacing. In its willful narcissism, the national bourgeoisie has lulled itself into thinking that it can supplant the metropolitan bourgeoisie to its own advantage. ... The national bourgeoisie in the underdeveloped countries is not geared to production, invention, creation, or work. All its energy is channeled into intermediary activities. Networking and scheming seem to be its underlying vocation. The national bourgeoisie has the psychology of a businessman, not that of a captain of industry. (98)

#### **Fanon and the Center-Periphery Dialectic**

Fanon's notion of space and periphery are directly related to colonialism:

Since colonialism is about the expropriation of space it is immediately political. Addressing the politics of space, Fanon challenged the newly indepen-

dent nations to deal with the legacies of colonialism by redistributing land and decentralizing political power, vertically and horizontally. (Gibson 227)

For Fanon, the relationship between the center and the periphery is not just characterized by a geographical division but first and foremost by unequal power relations that also reflect socio-economic realities. In the words of Lefebvre, "space and the politics of space 'express' social relationships and react against them" (15). With his analysis of everyday racism as a geopolitical colonization, Fanon understood colonialism as a spatial relation. As Kipfer remarks:

Fanon analyzed everyday racism as an alienating spatial relation, treated colonization as spatial organization, and viewed decolonization in part as a form of reappropriating and transforming spatial relations in the colonial city and through the construction of nationwide sociospatial alliances. (701)

Likewise, Henri Lefebvre's theories of everyday life, urbanization, the production of spaces and everyday colonization in postwar France seem to be inspired by the Fanonian Manichean colonial city (701).

Similar to Fanon, Lefebvre considers colonialism "not only as a historical era of territorial expansion but more generally as the role of the political authority in

reproducing relations of production and domination through the territorial organization of relationships of centre and periphery" (720). For Fanon the colonial city gave rise to a new urban formation which he calls "the Manichean city," in which racial, national and economic differences are separated and hierarchized (Varma 10). This structured space leads to intensive alienation and to the formation of revolutionary subjects:

In fact the insurrection, which starts in the rural areas, is introduced into the towns by that fraction of the peasantry blocked at the urban periphery, those who still have not found a single bone to gnaw in the colonial system. These men, forced off the family land by the growing population in the countryside and by colonial expropriation, circle the towns tirelessly, hoping that one day or another they will be let in. It is among these masses, in the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead. The lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people. (Fanon 80-81)

Thus Fanon combines the concept of space with the formation of the

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revolutionary subject. The structural relations between periphery and center forge a common consciousness and lead to violent revolts. Put differently, the relationship between the center and the periphery is ultimately tantamount to that between master and slave. But, as it is subject to Hegelian dialectic logic, it also breeds the development of a new self-consciousness.

In the new era of globalization the key aim of using Fanon's revolutionary model is to explain the persistent and deepening inequality that shapes relations between the North and South, or core and periphery. The structure of the world system has remained the same since fifty years.

In the megacities, neoliberalism magnified the parallel worlds described by Fanon. In cities like Cairo, Istanbul and Ankara, "modern" and "traditional" ways of life and forms of consumerism exist side by side. Shopping malls and department stores, streets full of music venues, and barricaded noble suburbs for the new rich are present in every major city in the world, most especially in the Near and Middle East.

The increasing divide between developed capitalist countries and the periphery, capitalist globalization and new forms of economic, political, and cultural domination, partly inherited from

colonization, makes the Fanonian commitment against the enslavement of peoples more relevant today than ever. That is, given a globalization dominated by neoliberalism, Fanonian theory can be deemed a suitable approach, an intellectual weapon so to speak, to antagonize the resurgence of colonial ideology. And indeed, to many activists in the anti-globalization's movements, Fanon is the initiator of a revolutionary project that must be defended and reflected on in the ongoing era of globalization.

The current fascination with Fanon and his ultimate timeliness can be explained by the convergence of the problems of colonialism, space and the subject-formation, which outlines Fanon's oeuvre. Fanon provides a masterful account of the necessity and the difficulty, but also the possibility of liberation from these structural constraints. However, the question remains whether or not the Fanonian solution of violent revolts, which shall overcome the modern forms of alienation on the local and global level, is still relevant.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This outline of Fanon's life has already been covered in Pannewick and Khalil 105-22.

<sup>2</sup> *Négritude* is both a literary and ideological philosophy, which seeks to encourage a common racial identity for black Africans worldwide. As a historical term, it designates a strategy mapped out in order to oppose French colonialism.

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